



"A fast-paced tale of betrayal and revenge that grabbed me from page 1 and refused to let go."

—GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

# HALF A KING

NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOE

ABERCROMBIE

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HALF  
A KING



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BETTER GEAR  
THAN GOOD SENSE  
A TRAVELER CANNOT CARRY

FROM HÁVAMÁL,  
THE SPEECH OF THE HIGH ONE

I.

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THE  
BLACK  
CHAIR

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# THE GREATER GOOD

There was a harsh gale blowing on the night Yarvi learned he was a king. Or half a king, at least.

A seeking wind, the Gettlanders called it, for it found out every chink and keyhole, moaning Mother Sea's dead chill into every dwelling, no matter how high the fires were banked or how close the folk were huddled.

It tore at the shutters in the narrow windows of Mother Gundring's chambers and rattled even the iron-bound door in its frame. It taunted the flames in the firepit and they spat and crackled in their anger, casting clawing shadows from the dried herbs hanging, throwing flickering light upon the root that Mother Gundring held up in her knobbled fingers.

"And this?"

It looked like nothing so much as a clod of dirt, but Yarvi had learned better. "Black-tongue root."

"And why might a minister reach for it, my prince?"

"A minister hopes they won't have to. Boiled in water it can't be seen or tasted, but is a most deadly poison."

Mother Gundring tossed the root aside. "Ministers must sometimes reach for dark things."

"Ministers must find the lesser evil," said Yarvi.

"And weigh the greater good. Five right from five." Mother Gundring gave a single approving nod and Yarvi flushed with pride.

The approval of Gettland's minister was not easily won. "And the riddles on the test will be easier."

"The test." Yarvi rubbed nervously at the crooked palm of his bad hand with the thumb of his good.

"You will pass."

"You can't be sure."

"It is a minister's place always to doubt—"

"But always to seem certain," he finished for her.

"See? I know you." That was true. No one knew him better, even in his own family. Especially in his own family. "I have never had a sharper pupil. You will pass at the first asking."

"And I'll be Prince Yarvi no more." All he felt at that thought was relief. "I'll have no family and no birthright."

"You will be Brother Yarvi, and your family will be the Ministry." The firelight found the creases about Mother Gundring's eyes as she smiled. "Your birthright will be the plants and the books and the soft word spoken. You will remember and advise, heal and speak truth, know the secret ways and smooth the path for Father Peace in every tongue. As I have tried to do. There is no nobler work, whatever nonsense the muscle-smothered fools spout in the training square."

"The muscle-smothered fools are harder to ignore when you're in the square with them."

"Huh." She curled her tongue and spat into the fire. "Once you pass the test you only need go there to tend a broken head when the play gets too rough. One day you will carry my staff." She nodded toward the tapering length of studded and slotted elf-metal which leaned against the wall. "One day you will sit beside the Black Chair, and be Father Yarvi."

"Father Yarvi." He squirmed on his stool at that thought. "I lack the wisdom." He meant he lacked the courage, but lacked the courage to admit it.

"Wisdom can be learned, my prince."

He held his left hand, such as it was, up to the light. "And hands? Can you teach those?"

"You may lack a hand, but the gods have given you rarer gifts."